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A SELF-INFILCTED WOUND: THE U.S. IN LEBANON 1982-1984

BY

JAMES A. McWHIRTER

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Personalities of policy-makers, over-confidence leading to unrealistic assumptions, disregard of local realities, inconsistencies due to critical turnovers of key U.S. decision makers, frustrations in failure causing the reckless use of force and simple negligence, were all ingredients in the Lebanon fiasco. These threads are herein traced from the original over-optimism following the successful evacuation of PLO forces from Beirut, through the unsuccessful attempts to pressure and cajole a U.S.-brokered peace plan, and finally to the realization that the diplomatic-military efforts on behalf of the Lebanese government could not prop up an otherwise hopeless regime.

There were many lessons learned during the U.S. involvement, if within the narrow political-military context of the conflict, they are heeded. Military means can accomplish but military-ends; they cannot furnish to an unhealthy regime credibility, should it be otherwise lacking. Likewise the rules of engagement must be tailored to fluctuating realities on the ground, and, most importantly, they must be clearly communicated to the military, the Congress, and the public, without whose support there can be no consensus of will. The lives lost to the folly in Lebanon will be in vain if a thorough examination of the causes goes unstudied.

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A SELF-INFILCTED WOUND:
THE U.S. IN LEBANON 1982-1984

AN INDIVIDUAL STUDY PROJECT

by

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ABSTRACT

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Foreign Policy Analysis
10-10-89

A SELF-INFLICTED WOUND:
THE U.S. IN LEBANON 1982-1984

A terrorist driving a Mercedes truck crashed into the United States Marine headquarters near the Beirut airport, catching the Marines unprepared. The detonated bomb, the equivalent of six tons of dynamite, killed 241 "peacekeepers".¹ Four months later, the Marines were "redeployed" to Sixth Fleet ships offshore, essentially ending the ill-fated U.S. intervention in Lebanon.

Unbounding hope, then growing doubt, and finally acquiescence in failure, were the ingredients of the Lebanon adventure.

Who, or what, was to blame?

An exhaustive inquiry was conducted by U.S. officials and the press immediately following the incident finding varying degrees of personal and institutional culpability.

- Officers throughout the chain of command did not consider terrorism to be a primary threat despite Beirut's deadly history of such acts;
- Marines were not trained in methods to combat terrorist attacks;
- Marine intelligence officers were deluged with raw intelligence reports about terrorist threats but were never provided with the expertise required to evaluate them;

-- Pre-attack security was found to be insufficient to avert the attack.²

Specific culpability was properly laid at the feet of the Marines and their commanders who were found to be negligent about security despite specific intelligence warnings. From a narrow perspective, one has to strain to refute such an explanation; however, notwithstanding its accuracy, the excuse does little to sort out the complexity of the policy which was the basis of the Marine presence.

To understand the tragedy in its entirety, one must begin with its genesis--the Israeli invasion of 1982--and thereafter trace the complicated decision-making process which led to American military involvement. Three central questions, therefore, are why were the American forces in Beirut, what was their mission, and why, given America's overwhelming strength, were their efforts such an abysmal failure.

The Israeli invasion of Lebanon began during June of 1982. The Israelis quickly fought their way north to the outskirts of Beirut, eventually surrounding the P.L.O. and laying siege to West Beirut. The military objective was to secure southern Lebanon and destroy the P.L.O. The political objective was to alter the political climate in Lebanon in order to give Israel a free hand in dealing with the West Bank and Gaza--and to lead to the establishment of a Christian-dominated Lebanon.³

The Lebanese conflict seemed tailor-made for deployment of UN Peacekeeping Forces; however, the urgency of the situation together with the self-interests of the parties involved precluded such an approach. The Lebanese Government, wrecked by a seven year civil war, badly needed the assistance of the U.S. to restore its military and political credibility over its internal adversaries. The Israelis needed the U.S. to bolster its rapidly diminishing image in the international community as a result of its savage military invasions. Lastly, the P.L.O. desired a direct dialogue with the U.S. in order to shield itself from the Israeli onslaught, as well as hopefully to establish a U.S. relationship after its apparent abandonment by its Soviet and Arab allies. The presence of UN Peacekeeping Forces could facilitate none of the above ambitions. Although President Reagan initially preferred the UN Peacekeeping role option, the prospect that the Soviets would play a role in such action killed the proposal. Presciently, UN Secretary-General Perez de Cuellar warned the U.S. against the creation of a multi-national Peacekeeping Force for Lebanon, predicting its failure based on the intractable internal complexities of Lebanon.⁴

Reagan Administration officials began considering the idea of a U.S. military role in Lebanon shortly after the Israeli invasion.⁵ Although then-Secretary of State Alexander Haig was in favor of such a commitment, there was particular resistance to the idea by Defense Secretary Weinberger. Administration envoy, Philip Habib, fresh from successful shuttle diplomacy

disengaging Israeli and P.L.O. forces in southern Lebanon in 1981, strongly endorsed the move. Habib convinced President Reagan and NSC Director Clark that such a gamble was warranted.⁶ In response, Reagan ordered his interagency Special Situation Group, headed by Vice-President Bush, to produce contingency plans for U.S. participation in the P.L.O. evacuation. Just before a plan was constructed, President Reagan decided to go along with Habib, the crisis manager who had now become the architect of Middle East policy in the absence of a Secretary of State (the interim period between Secretaries Haig and Shultz). Habib argued that if the U.S. failed to offer Marines as a bargaining chip, the P.L.O. evacuation negotiations would fail, thus the U.S. would suffer a loss of credibility. In short, it was a bold initiative predicated on the proven potential of Habib as a negotiator together with the surgical use of U.S. and other multinational forces. Habib's optimism was well-grounded: Syria was defeated, the P.L.O. were hopelessly surrounded, and Israel lacked the will to generate the potentially costly coup de grace. Therefore, Syria was no longer viewed as a factor, and Israel and the P.L.O. were simultaneously in need of rescue. The gamble worked; in fact, as events later showed, it worked too well. The P.L.O. was spirited out of Beirut, the Israelis accepted a temporary reprieve, U.S. peacekeepers departed in fifteen days, and Habib's efforts were rewarded with a nomination for the Nobel Peace Prize.⁷

When the Reagan Administration decided, over the weekend

of September 18 and 19, 1982, to redeploy Marines--forty-eight hours after the discovery of the massacre at the Palestinian refugee camps--the primary motivation was guilt and embarrassment over the slayings of hundreds of civilians. Most officials later agreed that the Marines were sent back to Lebanon reflexively without careful consideration of the impact.⁸ The President's decision may well have been visceral, after reportedly viewing TV footage of the emotionally wrenching siege of Beirut and the subsequent plight of massacred Palestinian refugees;⁹ however, guilt goes but so far in explaining the decision to intervene militarily. As important in the planned involvement was a set of expectations concerning the possible benefits to be gained by the U.S. from the apparent Israeli military victory over P.L.O. and Syrian forces. The achievements were to include the following:

- rebuilding a friendly and stable government in Beirut
- withdrawal of all foreign forces, upon which the first achievement was to be based
- security for northern Israel
- demonstration of the superiority of the American influence over Soviet
- inflicting a blow to the P.L.O., striking at international terrorism, removing a major obstacle to renewed Arab-Israeli peace process¹⁰

The Reagan Peace Plan, announced after the successful evacuation of P.L.O. forces and before the massacre and redeployment,

was to be the cornerstone of President Reagan's Middle East policy. The overconfidence generated by earlier diplomatic successes and the elimination of Syrian and P.L.O. stumbling blocks set the stage for yet another Middle-East peace initiative. After all, American Middle-East strategy, the records showed, had been most successful when the U.S. had taken advantage of crisis situations to advance diplomatic solutions.¹¹ The most recent notable example was the 1973 Egyptian/Syrian/ Israeli war followed by the Camp David Accords.

Optimism for a new Middle-East initiative seemed well grounded. The P.L.O. was at a point of maximum weakness, offering perhaps a unique opportunity for an initiative on the Palestinian autonomy question. Israel had defeated or neutralized all its potential adversaries. In short, the apparent military success in Lebanon appeared to create "opportunities" which would never present themselves again. The solution to the Lebanese crisis could therefore be the springboard for a bold diplomatic effort to solve the Palestinian question. U.S. Marines, together with other allied forces, would provide the needed presence to carry out yet another Camp David-like initiative. The contagious optimism of Habib was infectious to policy-makers inexperienced in Middle-East diplomacy.

The linking of the Reagan Peace Plan to success in factional Lebanon would prove fatal; not only to the peace initiative, but to American military presence as well. The perils of the

Levant were not adequately appreciated, for even if diplomacy was successful, there would remain what experts warned could prove an insurmountable problem--welding a multitude of feuding sects with their private armies again into a united, independent and stable Lebanon with an effective army. Each of Lebanon's sects are split among rival factions that run along religious as well as political and family lines. It has been calculated that there are at least 96, and as many as 164 factions, not to mention as many as 40 independent militias or armed gangs, none of which were likely to surrender their feudal turf.¹²

Diplomatically, all the preconceived assumptions (objectives) failed to materialize. The U.S. realized that "strong" and "stable" were mutually exclusive in describing a centralized Lebanese government. Removing foreign forces proved unobtainable, as Israel refused to leave until it obtained an agreement with Lebanon, and Syria rearmed to double its pre-war strength, erasing any hope of a settlement unless it occurred on its terms. The northern border of Israel remains threatened to this day, requiring large numbers of protective Israeli surrogate forces. The P.L.O., despite defeat militarily, remained a powerful stumbling block to the peace process refusing to enter into negotiations with Hussein. The blow against terrorism failed completely, as Iran-inspired terrorism effectively ended the U.S. presence in Lebanon.

The Reagan Administration became a hostage to its own peace plan as soon as the announcement was made public. King Hussein

was unrealistically chosen to carry the responsibility of brokering the plan with Arafat; then, once obtaining Arafat's authority to act on behalf of the Palestinians, the U.S. would weigh in and pressure Israel to a settlement. The U.S. assumed it could convince Israel to withdraw from Lebanon, that a beaten Syria would follow, and that U.S. success in Lebanon would convince moderate Arabs to fall in behind the peace process. Indeed, Jordan's Hussein demanded that the U.S. successfully broker withdrawal of all foreign forces as a precondition to joining the peace process. Over the following months, all the assumptions linked to the Peace Plan--withdrawal of Syrian and Israeli forces, King Hussein's assumed influence over the Palestinians, and finally, and most importantly, U.S. success in rebuilding Lebanon's beleaguered government--unraveled.

During the summer of 1983, with the Reagan Plan dead, the focus of U.S. activity turned toward Lebanon. The U.S. had never before confronted such an acute and prolonged Arab-Israeli crisis. Compounding the problems, American combat forces were directly involved in a war for the first time since Vietnam.

America's backing of Lebanese President Gemayel unintentionally gave the fragile regime a false sense of confidence leading to its avoidance in carrying out critical power sharing compromises with its host of factional enemies. Syria's influence over the Lebanese Moslem opposition dramatically increased as its military strength grew and Gemayel failed to come to grips with needed

government reforms. Likewise, Lebanon's troubles sucked Washington into deeper and increasingly unmanageable commitments, distracting U.S. Middle-East policy away from the central issue of Arab-Israeli peace and into the multiple crises of a country torn by internal unrest.

Militarily, the core of the problem was the ambiguity of the mandate for the Marines. Originally dispatched to carry out the withdrawal of P.L.O. forces, their mission was quickly and successfully concluded in 15 days. At the time of redeployment, their stay was predicted to be for a limited period, with no expectation to involve them in combat duties, nor would they be operating in a hostile environment. Generally stated by Administration officials, the Marines would assist the Lebanese government by rebuilding the hopeless Lebanese Army and ultimately help restore sovereignty, political independence and territorial integrity.

Unfortunately, the key would rest on the overestimation of the size and abilities of the Lebanese Army. The day the Marines were redeployed, a senior State Department official reported to Congress that the Lebanese had 21,000 troops. A U.S. Army assessment commission, headed by Major General Barlett, however, found less than half that number, most of whom had not been in uniform in years. The Barlett report predicted a completely rebuilt Lebanese Army could take over internal security duties in 18 months--if foreign forces withdrew and the local militias

disarmed.¹³

The first direct attack against the Marines occurred during March, 1983. Other evidence--intelligence reporting--suggested the beginning of a possible campaign to force the peacekeeping contingents out of Lebanon.¹⁴

As diplomacy failed and casualties mounted, frustration set in. During April, 1983, the American Embassy was destroyed, and the Lebanon-Israeli accords were stillborn. Middle-East policy in disarray, the Administration began to rethink its strategy. By September, 1983, the new Middle-East envoy, Bud McFarlane (replacing Habib, who had come to a diplomatic dead-end according to NSC Director Clark), convinced the President to take an increasingly muscular course of action.¹⁵ First, to protect the Marines and later to assist directly the combat forces of President Gemayel, President Reagan, against the advice of the military and embassy personnel on the ground, ordered the first use of naval gunfire in the Mediterranean since World War II. The die was cast; no longer could the Marines be assumed to be impartial peacekeepers. In taking sides, U.S. prestige and credibility was now squarely behind the survival of Gemayel's government. In retrospect, the subsequent suicide bombing of the Marine headquarters, or at least a similar attack, appears to have been all but inevitable.

From the time American naval guns provided their first

support of Gemayel's government forces in September, 1983, to the most serious escalation in December, 1983, when U.S. planes hit Syrian positions in retaliation against reconnaissance flights, the stakes for the U.S. had risen dramatically. Syria, Moscow's surrogate, was now perceived as the chief obstacle to the success of Reagan's Middle-East policy. The U.S. Embassy and Marine Headquarters bombings, military support for Gemayel's opponents--in short, the entire Lebanon mess, were all blamed on Assad's Syria. Direct U.S. military confrontation with Syria, recommended by National Security Advisor McFarlane and Secretary of State Shultz, was ruled out in February, 1984, when the Lebanese government once again teetered on the edge of military collapse. The U.S. Government, now even more divided over its political-military strategy, had three options: disengage; preserve U.S. interests, but at a great cost by going to war with Syria; or bring to bear the selective use of force in support of what McFarlane called "Agile Diplomacy". The war option and "Agile Diplomacy" approaches were unobtainable because of the policy differences between State and Defense--ironically, Shultz favored the military option, while Weinberger favored disengagement. The collapse of Lebanon's Army--not to mention the coming U.S. presidential elections--made withdrawal the only salvageable course of action.¹⁶

On February 7, 1984, President Reagan announced the withdrawal of 1600 Marines from Lebanon.

CONCLUSION

When a military presence is undertaken under one set of assumptions and the situation on the ground subsequently changes so radically that those earlier assumptions, and thus the objectives, are no longer attainable, a nation's foreign policy--and especially the military arm of that policy--is threatened.

The cardinal mistake made by the Administration concerned not only the pragmatic assessment of potential obstacles to its diplomacy but the uncompromising nature of the Lebanese regime as well. Military means can accomplish only military ends; while the armed forces of the U.S. can help defend a politically healthy ally against an enemy military attack, they cannot supply that ally with political health, should it be lacking.

With the failure of U.S. diplomacy, the "presence" of the Marines served no useful purpose, if indeed it ever had. They were bunkered down around the Beirut airport totally preoccupied with protecting themselves against artillery bombardment. Moreover, the Marines were caught in an ever-increasing escalation of firepower which occurred under the original basic rules of engagement that the Marines could fire only in self-defense. This political-military dilemma led to the military attempting to second-guess the diplomats, especially in personal security areas such as whether weapons should be loaded.

As well, part of the problem was that the political leadership

changed the Marines' largely ceremonial role, once diplomacy had failed, to one more aggressive, without changing the original rules of engagement.

One Marine general called it a "cruel dilemma--the Marines cannot leave without it being interpreted as showing the white feather, and yet they cannot go to the aid of the beleaguered Lebanese Army without turning their mission into combat rather than 'the presence', the President asked them to provide."¹⁷

The dilemma of the Marines' mission being irrevocably linked to diplomatic-policy decisions was graphically illustrated on September 19, 1983. Presidential Envoy McFarlane's team was holed-up in a bunker at the U.S. Ambassador's residence in proximity to an ongoing battle between Druze militiamen and Lebanese Army forces at Suk al-Gharb. Grim reports--unsubstantiated by U.S. military personnel on the scene--of the demise of the Lebanese Army forces, together with scattered artillery fire overhead, prompted one of the team's members to order Marine Commander Geraghty to fire naval gunfire in support of the Lebanese Army. When Geraghty protested that it would end the Marines' neutrality and make the Marines Beirut Airport's "sitting ducks", he was overruled by Administration officials who felt the fledgling Lebanese Army might not easily recover from a defeat.¹⁸

Preeminent among the mistaken assumptions was a feeling of unbridled overconfidence among some of the diplomats involved

in key decision making. Against overwhelming odds, Habib's team had produced unprecedented success from what almost all observers thought a hopeless deadlock--the successful withdrawal of P.L.O. forces from the brink of annihilation at the hands of Israel. Habib, indeed many American diplomats, "had the feeling that we could do anything".¹⁹

Some officials also said the Administration's relationship with the Lebanese Government contributed to the problem of U.S. overconfidence. "There was a period, until the end of 1982 basically, when the Government would do anything we told them to do", reports one senior official.²⁰ The problem, not realized until later, was that when the Lebanese Government spoke, it was increasingly speaking for only the minority Christians.

In the end, the Marines' position at Beirut's airport became untenable once they were seen--rightly or wrongly--siding with Gemayel and his fellow Christians against the disenfranchised Moslem majority. Finally, the U.S. military in Lebanon found no peace to keep, no legitimate government to support, and no place to hide from attack.

Following the U.S. departure, its hands no longer tied and its prestige no longer jeopardized in Lebanon, the Reagan Administration was free to respond swiftly when friendly countries requested help against external threats. During the summer of 1984, the U.S. dispatched AWACS planes to counter Libya's threat

to Egypt and Iran's attacks on Saudi oil installations, providing demonstrative proof of the Carter Doctrine's assertion of U.S. vital interest in the Middle East.

Clearly, the U.S. goals should have been studied and pursued with a mix of pragmatism and realism rather than reflexiveness which characterized the affair.

The decision making approach of the Administration remained chaotic throughout the eighteen months of involvement. If, as most observers of the system believe, policy changes when the players change, the constant turnover of key foreign policy figures certainly seems to have caused a lack of consistency. In the eighteen month period of involvement, there were three successive sets of decision-makers. The decision to deploy and redeploy Marines was reflexively made by a President and a Middle East envoy in the haste that genuine concern for the suffering of people more often than not forces. The continued presence of vulnerable troops in an untenable position, together with a divided foreign policy team--State vs. Defense--clouded public understanding of the problems of Lebanon and the larger Middle East picture. Hence, the Administration failed to build true consensus necessary to carry out its objective and never really articulated to the Congress, public, or military why the U.S. was involved in Lebanon.

Despite the defeat that U.S. withdrawal inflicted on American

policy in the Middle East, there was produced a healthy dose of realism. The U.S. and its allies stood by President Gemayel while there was the slimmest chance of his honestly pursuing national reconciliation, and once there was virtually no hope of unifying Lebanon, President Reagan rightfully cut his losses and withdrew, rather than shed additional U.S. blood in a hopeless gamble. The U.S. adventure was, in the end, an American mistake; however, the mistake was not irreparable, and at least had the merit of showing that President Reagan could stick to a principled aim so long as it had any chance of working. The ultimate cost in lives, if nothing else, serves as a testament to the folly produced by overconfidence, vanity, and a disregard of Middle East realities.

What lessons did the Lebanon experience teach? Perhaps the lesson learned was that the United States, after eighteen and 265 dead peacekeepers, had finally been forced to come face to face with the limits of its power.

ENDNOTES

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